Women in Herodotus

Page locations are given in quartiles: e.g., p. 57d = the bottom fourth of p. 57. "H." = Herodotus.

This handout will relate the results of Carolyn Dewald's survey to issues that we have seen in Homer and will be confronting in Greek tragedy. Above all, I want to emphasize that the extreme and disturbing portrayal of women in tragedy may give a narrow and misleading view of the range of ways that they were conceived of in other contexts by fifth-century Greeks. Herodotus' 375 mentions of women (individuals and groups), break down into the following categories:

Groups of women in ethnographic accounts (76 mentions):

The Odyssey's close observation of the relationship of gender roles and social structure (strong queen indicates weak men) does not reckon with any degree of cultural otherness (different languages, gods, rituals, or marriage customs). Much lore about other places and peoples remains in the background (e.g., about the Egyptians and Phoenicians), but the storyteller can only see with Greek eyes. The far-away societies are all permutations on the social ideal represented by the once and future Ithaka: The soft, over-protected Phaiakian males are overshadowed by their women, while, at the other end of the spectrum, the barbarous Cyclops exists at a stage before agriculture, sailing, hospitality, and marriage (primary relationship with a ram).

Part of the time H., like any tourist, projects onto other peoples the needs and prejudices of his own culture and sex through accounts of exotic customs, above all sexual practices. Much of the lore that he remembers from sailors, traders, tour guides, and hostile informants in the next country ('their mothers wear army boots!') may offer insight mostly into the imaginative needs of a male of his time. This we might still call "myth." He goes beyond Homer and into the range of "fact" (inventing historiography, and mapping the project of anthropology) when, with an admirably open mind, he also records authentic information about the different ways of marrying, worshipping, dressing, and eating that are "natural" (sacred, immutable) to other cultures. He is even willing to reverse the perspective and conclude that Greek ways were invented and agreed on at some point and could conceivably be changed (cultural relativism, "custom is the king of all," p. 220a).

Book 2, the Egyptian logos (account), shows the range of H.'s materials. At pp. 142c-143d some tour guide or prankster has sold H. a bizarre line about the Egyptians as an upside-down inversion of other societies ("women pass water standing up, men sitting down"). Yet what follows is not some account of a disordered society to make the listener glad to be Greek, for H. accepts the Egyptians as the inventors of many customs (e.g., religious rituals, p. 152c; p. 154c) and as predecessors of the Greeks in discovering and naming the Olympian gods (pp. 145d - 150b). Presumably some priest or guide had skipped the complexity of, "Here is our god Amun, who functions much like your Zeus," and simply said, "Amun is Zeus." Though the Greek pantheon owed more to Mesopotamian religion than Egyptian, we should credit H.'s openmindedness and lack of intimidation by the orthodoxies of any religious establishment as he credits Egyptian cults for being in some ways older and more authentic versions of those of the Greeks.
H. is also willing to accept from the priests a version of what really happened, back in the reign of Pharaoh Proteus (!), to Helen--a tale that contradicts Homer (she did not really go to Troy; pp. 170d - 174b). Then at once there follows an entertaining Arabian Nights tale about Pharaoh Rhampsinitus (pp. 174d - 177d), who later descended into Hades and played dice with Demeter. H. is not entirely convinced (p. 178b). The main yarn contains both a bit of male sexual fantasy (king uses his daughter as prostitute) but also involves a woman as enforcer of social codes (mother insists on proper burial, p. 176b; cf. Antigone).

In other instances, reports of how societies construct gender differently get mixed up with male-coded fantasies about sexual possibility. Ten other times H. mentions women as part of public and social life in a way that they are not in the Greek world. We can roughly trace a continuum that shades off into some ancient Playboy Channel: Men and women with equal authority (p. 27d); matrilineality (p. 111b); women must kill in battle to be allowed to marry (descendants of the mythic Amazons, p. 309a); auctions to assure that all women find a mate (p. 121a-b); prostitution to accumulate a dowry (p. 80b); athletic contests for girls, but revealing virginity (p. 331b-c); freedom for girls, chaperoning for wives (p. 342c). Some cases fall squarely in the "you wish" category (p. 128a; p. 329a-c). All of the tantalizing possibilities, often a polygynous theme park (Harem World), are located off in the range of exotic peoples (e.g. at about the cultural distance where the National Geographic is willing to start showing nudity.) On occasion, H. is shocked, though not less inclined to give the details (pp. 121d - 122b).

However, only about a third of the ethnographic mentions of women involve sexuality, and these involve a half dozen or so major cases--often cited and very memorable (as above) but in fact a very small part of H.'s project. More frequent, but naturally less conspicuous, are instances related to dress, family life, and religion: why Ionian women do not eat with or address their husbands by name (p. 101c); Spartan men and women mourn equally (p. 408a-b); the multiple wives of Thracians compete to be buried with their husbands (p. 342c); Libyan women invent Athena's aegis (p. 334a-b; cf. the punk hair, p. 334c); offerings to Demeter (p. 281d).

Two unsurprising regularities, based on my own impressions of the innumerable cases:

First, in ethnographic accounts sexuality plays a bigger role in the portrayals of women than of men. Second, though the customs of the Greeks need not be explained to the Greek audience, the explanation of foreign cultures leaves the impression that they are somehow more sexual than the Greek (again, the universal touristic impression).

H.'s view may be prurient on occasion and does reflect the common assumption that women, like barbarians, are more defined by their sexuality than are men (and therefore less capable of political and intellectual life), but his various accounts show little of the Odyssean view that women's power and autonomy in the public sphere comes at the expense of men's or only fills a vacuum created by weak men. In the Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus will present an extreme case. Nor do H.'s accounts share the tragedians' obsession with how women's power disrupts society and threatens men's lives (Clytaemnestra again; Medea; Phaedra; even the well-meaning Antigone). H. allows, probably on good historical authority, that in the non-urban, barbarous cultures where women have most freedom, the men as well are vigorous, if rough. See below for Tomyris and the Massagetae.
Women who do not act (128 mentions):

This is the category in which the *Iliad* keeps its women much of the time: women who get exchanged and who are imperilled by male violence. At the start of book 1 Io, Europa, Medea, and Helen introduce the category. Though H. passes on the Persians' quip about how only willing women get abducted (p. 42c), the misogyny involved pales in comparison to the portrayals of a wicked Helen by Aeschylus (*Agamemnon*) and Euripides (*Trojan Women*). Elsewhere H. shows little taste for verses of stories that blame women for the conflicts generated around them (cf. the Egyptian story, above, that lets Helen off the hook entirely).

Like the people behind the Trojan walls in the *Iliad*, women and children are a prime symbol of the vulnerabilities of cities in war. The Athenian men's problem of getting their families out of the city before Xerxes invades (p. 537) is typical.

The many histories of royal families put women, as objects of exchange and bearers of children, in many tangled situations. We have encountered Astyages' sexual dreams about his daughter Mandane (p. 85b-d) and his unsuccessful attempts to prevent her from breeding a son who would depose him. Women tend to get mentioned when infertility or the production of unfortunate children disrupt dynastic success. Only twice are women directly attacked because of these entanglements.¹ We shall encounter in the *Antigone* a catalogue of women who have suffered from *eros* (vv. 808ff., see reading questions pp. 85f.), which contains far more violence against women under these circumstances than does the entirety of the *Histories*.

Women who act in a family context (40 mentions):

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* contain important cases: Andromache gives advice to Hector, Hecuba gives it to her son and husband, Helen works on both Paris and Menelaus. H.'s women (like uncles and visiting Greeks) regularly serve as warning voices, reminding their menfolk of the safe or proper way of doing things: insisting on proper burial (p. 176b); warning of political enemies (p. 254b-c); eight-year old Spartan daughter warns dad of corrupting influence of an Ionian (p. 359b).

H., unlike Homer, depicts women who kill, but he is not nearly so obsessed as the tragedians. Such women are rare and are handled more even-handedly than in tragedy. The *Histories* open with an account of a husband-killer, Candaules' wife, but we should not be too quick to equate her with Aeschylus' demonic Clytaemnestra. H. makes no moral judgment of her; she is only responding to the outrage that her husband has committed; she replaces one king with another and he (unlike Aegisthus) works out well, causing a new dynasty to be founded; she apparently survives to a life of influence. She defends the conventions that her husband violates and disproves Gyges' belief that women lose their shame when naked. Far from losing her shame, she manages to punish transgression and restore propriety: No one but her husband will have seen her naked, even if she has to change husbands.

The decline of the Persian dynasty is marked not only by ignored warnings from the women but by transgressions against them (Cambyses marries and kills his sister, p. 216c-217a). The final tale in
the *Histories* involves a wife's revenge, even as Candaules' wife stars in the first. The weak and promiscuous Xerxes, who pursues his sister- and daughter-in-law, ends up with the wife that he deserves, Amestris, pp. 619b - 621c. Though the tale has fabulous aspects, it may well reflect an historical truth that escapes H.'s usual prejudices. The account reflects the viciousness of the competition to which court life reduced women (cf. Clytaemnestra and Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*). H. does not judge Amestris, and she is capable of fending for herself. In contrast to tragedy, what is missing is the male as target. Amestis' violence aims at a female body (p. 621b), while it is Xerxes who kills his brother (p. 621c).

**Women who act in the public sphere (22 mentions):**

Cyno: The rescuing of the infant Cyrus involves people at various ranks passing the buck, from the king on down: Astyages leaves the matter to his steward Harpagus ("snatcher"), who leaves it to the cowherd Mitradates, who leaves it to his wife--a woman, a slave, on the margins of society, and by her name ("bitch"; p. 92c) almost sub-human. Killing infants is a repellent and highly polluting activity, all the more so if they are royal. In the parallel myth of Romulus and Remus, the role is played by a "lupa" (female wolf or prostitute). Cyno is at the opposite end of society from the king. His tricky substitution backfires: In giving his wife a Persian instead of a Mede, he does not avert the grandson who deposes him, but manages to end his own Medean dynasty. Her tricky substitution works. Astyages breeds a "mule"; but the "bitch" rears a king. The adult Cyrus honors her (p. 92c) and deposes his grandfather. The tale is a study in exogamy: A vigorous new dynasty is produced by breeding Mede with Persian and by rearing the king among rural slaves. In this dynastic history, Cyno has something of the life-saving trickery of Gaia and Rhea (Hesiod's *Theogony*), as well as Demeter.

Tomyris: The Massagetae are promiscuous and allow women political power; Tomyris has succeeded to her husband's throne. Her position reflects not the weakness of the men but rather the barbarousness and vigor of the whole society. The river Araxes separates two modes of culture. Cyrus, now far from the wildness of his upbringing, falls under the influence of the tricky, urbane Croesus. The recent description of Babylonian culture, just conquered by Cyrus, reflects an extreme of urban decadence (pp. 121d - 122b). Cyrus is willing to sacrifice a portion of his army to lay a trap for Tomyris (p. 126c). On the other side is Tomyris, clever enough to see through Cyrus' overtures (p. 123d), but mostly a proponent of straightforward confrontation (p. 124b). A bit like the Cyclops, the rude Massagetae are entrapped by the elegance of the Persians' entertaining, but (like the Spartans) have a ferocious warrior ethic. Tomyris' son kills himself lest he be used as a hostage (p. 127b). In fact, Croesus' speech is right only in its generalizations about the wheel of fortune (p. 124c): In trying to avert the "intolerable disgrace for Cyrus son of Cambyses to give ground before a woman" (p. 125b), Cyrus ends up losing his head to her (p. 127d). The tricks (the banquet, taking the son hostage) have not averted open warfare, and have only stirred up the Massagetae. Croesus, who earlier conspired with the victorious Cyrus to unman his own Lydians (p. 104c), ends up having much the same effect on Cyrus. Tomyris is not entirely in the dominant and masculine position, for a mother's grief predominates as she desecrates the corpse (p. 127d), but the portrayal harbors no suspicions about unavoidable biological or social constraints on women's power. Maternal vengeance, such as Clytaemnestra vents
surreptitiously on Agamemnon (and then on Orestes), has quite a different and nobler aspect when Tomyris pursues it on the battlefield.

Artemisia: Though a barbarian, she represents H.’s hometown of Halicarnassus, and may profit from some local partisanship. She joins the campaign out of "manly courage" rather than compulsion (p. 474b-c). She fulfills the typical female role as warning voice with unusual boldness--considering military advantage rather than her own standing at court, as is duly appreciated by Xerxes (pp. 545d - 546d). She craftily survives the naval battle at Salamis, again with Xerxes' appreciation (pp. 552b - 553a).

**Priestesses and founders of religious cults (62 mentions):**

Besides Io, Europa, and other women abducted over long distances, H. includes some tales of women who establish new religious rites because of their displacement: founding oracles in Libya and Dodona (p. 151c - 152c), bringing the festival of Demeter (Thesmophoria) from Egypt to Greece (p. 197b), founding a temple of Athena (p. 201c), and enriching Apollo's shrine at Delos (p. 282b).

Most important is the priestess of Apollo at Delphi, the Pythia, whom we shall encounter again at the start of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. Delphi is the most important pan-Hellenic political and religious center. The oracle, for example, told colonists where they should settle. The Pythia advises the powerful, as well as common men, some 45 times. H. chiefly sees the priestess as spokesman for Apollo, and modern scholars are divided about whether she was an independent power or just a figurehead for the priests, perhaps giving incoherent replies to questions that they then shaped into verses carefully calculated to satisfy the questioner and ambiguous in ways that left them difficult to discredit. That the name of the Pythia is recorded (the Priestess Aristonice, p. 488a) indicates high status.

The oracle got a generally negative reception in tragedy, since Delphi had accommodated the Persians and in the Peloponnesian War favored the Spartans and allies. In the *Eumenides* we shall see that Orestes' purification at Delphi for killing his mother proves to be insufficient and he must go to Athens to get free from the Furies.

To broach a complicated and speculative topic: We are already familiar with the tendency of Greek males to confer on women religious, but not political, roles and in poetry to favor female deities as mediators between gods and men (Thetis, Iris, and in some measure Athena as the Olympian most closely involved in the affairs of Achilles and Odysseus). That is, above male-run human society are a range of female figures who communicate with the court of Zeus. As mouthpiece for Apollo, the human Pythia had a roughly comparable mediating role not just in myth, but in history as well. In H.’s world, she is at the center point of the various networks of political and religious power, including those of barbarians like Croesus.

Be on the look-out for the degree to which this central and organizing role of the priestess is missing or disrupted in Greek tragedy. Beyond the political reasons for this may lie the tragedians' tendency to discount women's power in even prophetic and priestly roles. For example, Apollo's mouthpiece in the *Agamemnon* is his victim Cassandra. The insufficient Pythia at the start of *The Eumenides* gives way to Athena herself, relocating female power from woman to goddess.